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Culture and Learner Beliefs: A Study of Three Malay Postgraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Culture influences how people experience. Although there is literature on how culture can influence adult learners' orientation to learning, there is little on how culture influences the nature of successful learning amongst adults (Merriam and Mohamad, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to examine how cultural values influence a selected group of successful adult learners' views on learning in the Malaysian education context. A qualitative research design was adopted to explore this question. Three postgraduates who had completed their studies on time were interviewed. Using the constant comparative method of data analysis (Wellington, 2000), five cultural values as identified by Abdullah (1996) and Hofstede (1991); collectivistic, religious, relationship-oriented, hierarchical, and face conscious were used to serve as the main themes in the analysis. In analysing the data, three cultural values emerged; religious, relationship-oriented and, collectivistic. These findings have implications for understanding how cultural values may influence adult Malay students' views on learning.

Keywords: Malay cultural values, successful postgraduates, views on learning

Introduction

Merriam and Mohamad claim that though there is no single definition of culture, most definitions highlight the notion of "shared beliefs, values,

customs, and meanings that distinguish one group of people from another” (2000, p. 45). In other words, culture is not associated with someone in particular, but rather with a group of people who have similarities in their way of thinking. As claimed by Abdullah (1996, p. 3), the culture of a society is the “glue that holds its members together through a common language, dressing, food, religion, beliefs, aspirations and challenges”. She further states that, “it is a set of learned behaviour patterns so deeply ingrained that they are acted out in unconscious and involuntary ways” (p. 3). Hence, culture may influence how the society “makes a living, the social units in which they live and work, and the meanings they assign to their lives” (Fry, 1990, p.129).

While in the West, self-reliance, personal achievement and autonomy are valued at any particular stage of life, collective and interdependent behaviour is obvious and considered as a norm in the Eastern context (Abdullah, 1996). The purpose of this study was to understand the nature of the learning experiences of successful Malay postgraduates. The present study assumes that the learning experiences of the selected successful Malay postgraduates would reflect, at least partially, if not wholly, the cultural values inherent amongst the Malay adult learners. Most importantly, as claimed by Merriam and Mohamad (2000, p. 48), “cultural values can shape how fundamental things [such as learning] are viewed”.

Malaysians' Cultural Values

As culture can be an abstract set of principles depicting the customary thoughts and behaviour of a group of people, attempts to study it and how it can shape the views of a selected group of respondents may be tedious. Nonetheless, in carrying out this study, the researcher was bound by the notion of culture as defined by cognitive anthropologists; that is, “culture is acquired knowledge, including beliefs, concepts, and standards, organized by cognitive structures that people use to function properly in a cultural context (Quinn & Holland, 1987, p. 136). The term ‘cultural values’ as it is referred to in this paper are “emotion-laden, internalized assumptions, beliefs, or standards that shape how we interpret our life experiences” (Merriam & Mohamad, 2000, p. 46). Additionally, views in the context of the present study refer to personal opinions, beliefs, and ideas.

Several researchers have conducted comparative studies on cultural values (Hofstede, 1991; Fry, 1990; Wolf, 1998; Antonovsky & Sagy,

1990; Thomas, 1991; Abdullah, 1996; Merriam & Muhamad, 2000). In brief, they have concluded that independence and competitiveness are highly valued by some western societies. As an example, according to Fry (1990, p. 138), "...in America, if not most Western cultures, remaining independent is valued above all else". He further claims, "Americans emphasize rugged individualism and self-reliance...Individuals are responsible for themselves". Additionally, in comparing that of an eastern context, he commented,

*The value of independence is by no means universal...
Where social units are more cohesive and life more
collective, the value of interdependence, not independence,
is accentuated.*

(p.138)

With regard to being successful and productive, it is argued that western culture emphasises "autonomy, control, and production" whereas eastern culture emphasises "being in harmony with nature, relationships, and cooperation rather than competition and interdependence" (Merriam & Mohamad, 2000, p. 47). Merriam and Mohamad (2000) further elaborated that in eastern culture, "spiritual well-being is of more concern than material well-being" (p. 48).

Additionally, a number of researchers (Merriam & Mazanah, 2000; Seufert, 2002; Chin, Chang, and Bauer, 2000; Kim and Bonk, 2002) have conducted studies on the role of culture in adult education. Merriam and Mazanah (2000) studied the role of culture on shaping the older adults' learning. They discovered that culture "defines the nature of learning in late life" (p. 45). While Seufert (2002) investigated culture affects on web based learning, Chin, Chang, and Bauer (2000) examined the influence of students' cultural background on their perceptions of learning. Chin, Chang, and Bauer discovered that despite the absence of significant differences in the students' opinions, the Anglo-Saxon students were more confident with web-based technology compared to the Asian students. Finally, Kim and Bonk (2002) examined cross-cultural differences in collaborative on-line learning among Finnish, American, and Korean learners. The findings revealed differences in learning motivation and approach.

Malaysia is a country which is culturally diverse. The Malaysian population comprises 65% Malays and Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputera groups, 26% Chinese and 8% Indians (pediaview, 2008). Interestingly, studies conducted by Abdullah (1996) and Merriam and Mohamad (2000)

have revealed that though Malaysians retain their own identity as Malays, Chinese and Indians, certain cultural values appear to be common to all Malaysian ethnic groups. Abdullah (1996) conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study on her trainees and clients. In her study, she documented her day-to-day experiences of teaching, training, consulting, and counselling Malaysian and foreign managers. From the research, Abdullah has identified five cultural values. The cultural values identified by her have been the guidelines for many researches (Abdullah, 1996, 2006; Merriam & Mohammad, 2000; Jamaliah, 2000, Raduan, Suppiah, Jegak & Jamilah, 2007, Badli Esham, 2008). According to her, “although each group retains its own identity, certain values appear to be common to all Malaysian groups” (in Merriam & Mohamad, 2000, p. 49). The following is a brief discussion on these values.

First, Malaysians are ‘collectivistic’, that is their identity is not determined by individual characteristics, instead by the collectivity or group to which the person belongs. With regard to ‘collectivistic’, Hofstede (1991) claims that in the Malaysian culture, ‘we’ is more important than ‘I’. He further elaborates that group interests are far more important than the individual interests and that the identity of a group is a set of collective characteristics. Abdullah (1996) claims that the identity of a person is based on his social network.

Second, Malaysians are ‘hierarchical’, which has resulted in an unequal distribution of wealth and power. Abdullah (1996) claims that these values could explain the kind of respect Malaysians have for the elders and those who have authority. Additionally, Hofstede (1991) further claims that value is placed on power differences between individuals and groups.

Third, Malaysians are ‘relationship oriented’. Their lives are all centred on family, village, country and social group ties. This entails the mutual and reciprocal obligations they have for each other.

Fourth, Malaysians are concerned with ‘face’ – maintaining dignity. This, according to Abdullah (1996) explains why Malaysians are sometimes reluctant to make others feel embarrassed or humiliated in public. Finally, Malaysians are religious in both a collectivist and individualist sense and they strongly believe that “happiness comes from suppressing self-interests for the good of others” and that “happiness could be discovered from within oneself through prayers and meditation” (Abdullah, 1996, p. 106).

Likewise, Hofstede (1991) also conducted research on culture and organization. Investigating how a working relationship is established in

the business industries, Hofstede has identified Malaysians as those who value 'power distance', 'collectivism', and are 'relationship oriented'. In this instance, in work-related matter a Malaysians value hierarchy, belongingness, and that work has a direct relationship and influence on their family.

This study was guided by the following research questions.

- What are the cultural values according to Abdullah (1996) that shape the research participants' views on learning?
- How have their cultural values shaped their views on learning?

The Method

To examine how cultural values shape postgraduates' views on learning, a qualitative research design was adopted. Qualitative research is descriptive and inductive, focussing on uncovering meaning from the perspective of the participants. In this instance, the present study was treated as a case study. According to Merriam (1988, p. 176), "a case study method is used because description and explanation are sought rather than prediction based on cause and effect." Her argument is supported by Donmoyer (1990, p. 155) who claims, "the primary interest of the case study is to understand the case, to extend an experience and not to generalize in the traditional sense or form universal laws."

A purposive sampling procedure was employed whereby three potential participants were identified based on their 'outstanding' performance in the faculty. The participants were labelled as 'outstanding' because they have a relatively good track record in their studies, which is evident from their exam transcripts. Additionally, they were considered 'outstanding' since they formed the top 5% of the student population since they were able to submit and pass their dissertation, which is the last component of their programme, at the end of their final semester without taking any extension or special leave.

All the participants were Malay postgraduate students of the Education Faculty in one of the public tertiary institutions in Malaysia. According to the postgraduate programme which they took, a minimum of four semesters are required for the completion of their studies. All the courses were in English.

Interviews were conducted with the participants on separate occasions. Each interview lasted about two hours and was conducted in English. Data were analysed using the constant comparative method as

presented by Wellington (2000). Through this method of analysis, important and relevant excerpts from the transcripts were coded and given themes. Basically, the five cultural values identified by Abdullah (1996) which are collectivistic, hierarchical, relationship oriented, face conscious, and religious were used to serve as the main categories. Additional information extracted from the data such as the reasons and examples given served as the sub-categories. Therefore, in analysing the transcripts, relevant excerpts were identified and grouped according to their categories. A tree diagram was then generated based on the categories and sub-categories. It is from this tree diagram that the conclusion and implications were made. The following diagram illustrates the processes involved in the present study in analysing data through the constant comparative method.

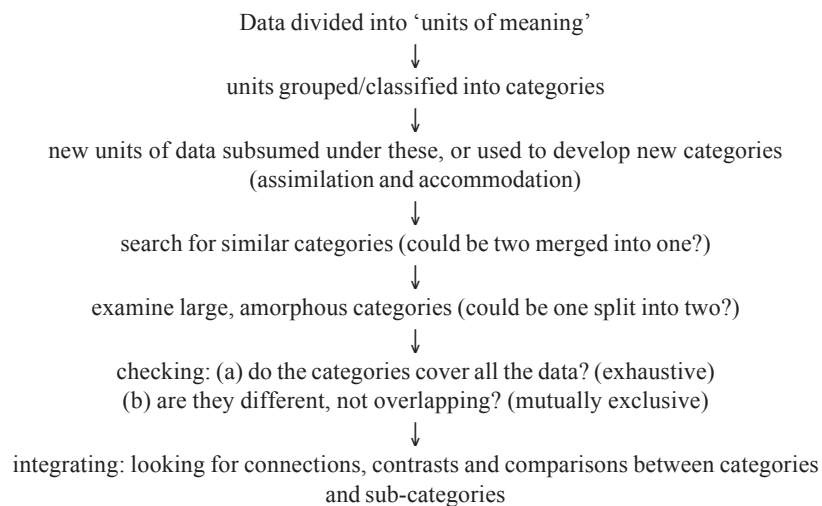


Figure 1: The 'Constant Comparative Method' (Wellington, 2000, p. 137)

Issues of Trustworthiness: Reliability and Validity

Trustworthiness is a term used by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to refer to the believability of a researcher's findings (Maykut and Morehouse, 2000, p. 64). Merriam commented on the idea of reliability and internal validity in the attempt to establish trustworthiness.

In the present study, reliability is ensured by the establishment of an audit trail. As suggested by Maykut and Morehouse (2000), an audit trail which includes the original interview transcripts and notes was built. The audit trail which is the documentation of the sources of data will enable the researcher to “walk people through [her] work” (Maykut and Morehouse, 200, p. 146). In this paper, several relevant excerpts from the interviews are displayed while others are documented, kept and made available for future retrieval by the researcher.

Finally, to ensure internal validity in the present study, “member checks” (Yin, 1988, p. 33) were conducted. Interpretations made by the researcher on the responses given by the respondents were taken to the respective respondent for confirmation. Additionally, an inter-rater panel using the Cohen Kappa’s (Cohen, 1960) degree of agreement was employed to ensure consistencies of the data interpretations. The researcher had the assistance of two colleagues who validated the interpretations and the coding. All the inter-raters are PhD in education holders. It is worth noting that the degree of agreement obtained for the present study was .87, which enabled the researcher to proceed with her analysis.

The Findings

The analysis of the interview transcripts suggests that ‘religious’ and ‘relationship oriented’ were the common cultural values that influenced the respondents’ views on learning. Additionally, ‘collectivistic’ was also another cultural value identified since the summary of the findings indicates a similar pattern in the participants’ views on their learning. In other words, the fact that the respondents shared similar opinions on how the two cultural values had influenced their views on learning indicated that they all shared similarities, which in turn describes them as ‘collectivistic’. These findings concur with the claims made by Merriam and Mohamad (2000) and Abdullah (1996) who state that Malaysians, the Malays in this case, are religious, relationship oriented, and collectivistic. The other two cultural values namely hierarchical, and face consciousness were not apparent in the present study. This could be due to the focus of the present study which sought to investigate the participants’ views on learning as well as the design of the study which employed interviews or the nature of the small sample. The tree diagram (Figure 2) on the following page summarizes the identified themes and sub-themes from the data analysis.

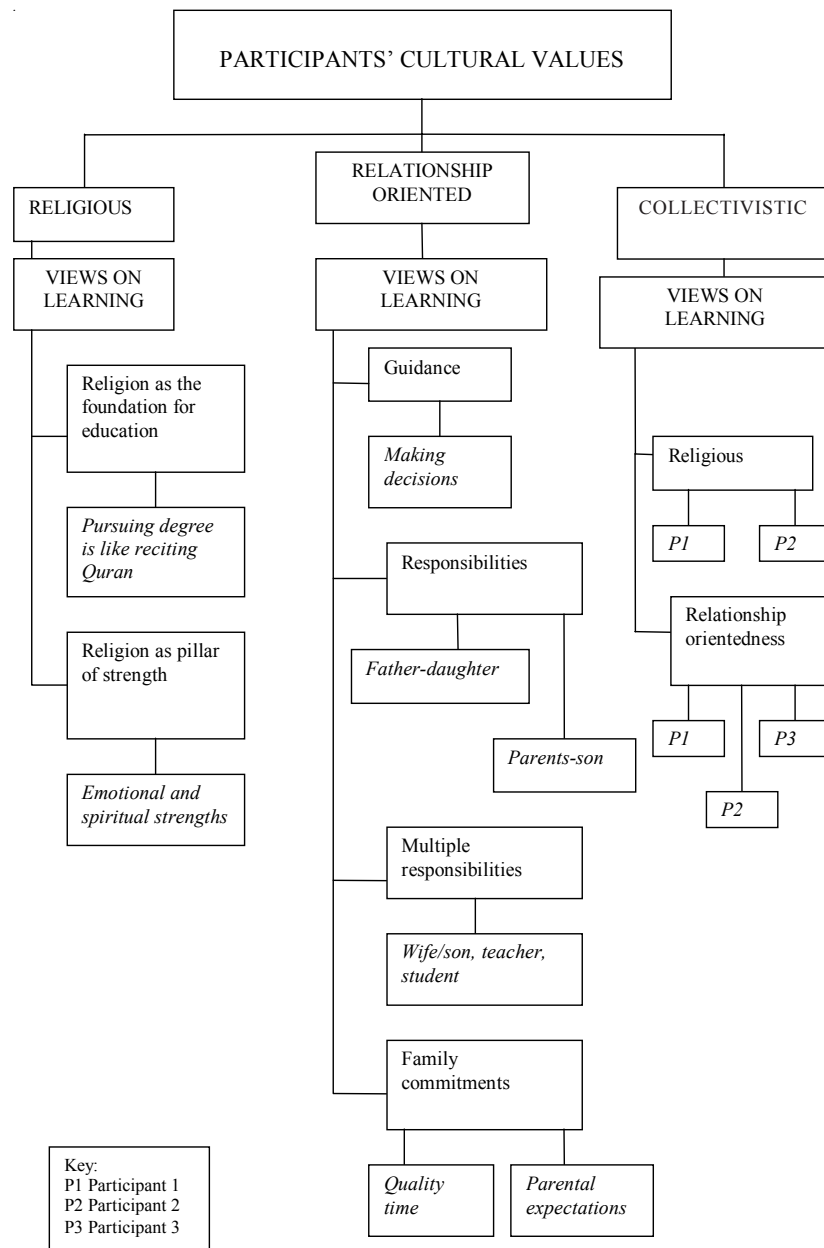


Figure 2: Participants' Cultural Values and Views on Learning

There are claims made by the participants during the interview sessions which indicate their cultural value as 'religious'. A participant identified as P1 gave an interesting and relevant comment which was related to the spiritual aspect as the foundation for strong and positive view towards learning and education. She gave a metaphorical description of her studies. According to her,

...Bachelor is just like IQRA' you know..and Master's is like MUQADDAM..And to do PhD is like being able to recite the QURAN..You know every Muslim must know how to read the Quran..But you could only do it if you've gone through the Iqra' and Muqaddam.

(P1)

This could be interpreted, in the mind of the participant, that pursuing a higher degree is like one's journey in learning how to read the Quran with correct diction and appropriate enunciation. As known to most Moslems, to be able to read the Quran with correct diction and appropriate enunciation would require the mastery of Arabic characters and recitation practices introduced through the *Iqra'* books and *Muqaddam* respectively. To the mind of the participant, pursuing postgraduate degrees is not an easy task as it involves various levels such as the first degree, and the Master's degree before completing a PhD.

It is interesting to note that at times when P2 felt like quitting, she resorted to her spiritual and emotional strengths. This is illustrated in the following:

"...There were times when I felt really bad..One of my friends was finishing her thesis..I worried I couldn't..but then I relaxed myself and told that Insyaallah God will help me..Hey..I know I'm doing something noble..God will be nice to me.."

(P2)

This finding resonates with what Abdullah claims, "happiness could be discovered from within oneself through prayers and meditation" (Abdullah, 1996, p. 106). At this juncture, it is worth noting that spirituality is commonly associated with religious faith and practice. In pursuing academic matters such as the postgraduate programme, it is quite easy to understand how 'religious' could shape the respondents' view on learning. Religious faith and practice have always had an influence on people's view on learning. Cooney (1999), Davis and Hersh (1991) and Kline (1962) are some of the researchers who reported on the connection

between religion and academic matters and pursuits. For example, Kline (1962) addresses the importance of mathematics in everyday life as highlighted by religion which in turn, has given rise to many academic institutions.

Relationship orientedness is also another value found in the present study. P1 claims that she has always been 'guided' by her family in making decisions such as pursuing her studies. To clarify herself, she described how it was her father who took the application form and suggested that she enrol in the programme. The fact that her father did this made her think about pursuing her studies seriously. She felt 'touched' and almost instantly she knew she wanted to do it.

The father-daughter bond and the responsibilities placed by her father on her, a married woman of 35, made her realize the responsibilities highlighted by her father. This in turn 'guided' her decision and was used as a good reason to complete her studies as that would please her father. In harmony with Abdullah (1996), this finding entails the mutual and reciprocal obligations the participant and her father have for each other.

At this juncture, it is perhaps worth noting the role of significant others in the life of the participants of the study. There has been a collection of research on the influence of significant others on the development of values (Zern, 1985), adjustments to new environments (Dunn et al., 1987) and self-esteem, academic interest and performance (McInerney et al., 2008). Additionally, significant others have also been found to have an impact on the formation of self-concept (Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton, 1976). The findings from these studies have provided evidence of substantial impacts of significant others such as appreciation of academic pursuits, motivation, and the value of academic success. Generally, it is quite easy to accept how the previous participant relied on her father – the significant other, in deciding the worth and value in her pursuing her studies. The following discussions on the responses given by the other participants of the study also indicate a strong influence of the significant others on them.

Being adult learners with multiple responsibilities, the participants showed evidence of maintaining the interest and strength to fulfil the demands of the programme. Many times the participants indicated trouble, and difficulties in accomplishing their academic tasks. P2 claims;

Please imagine how tired I was..I had to cook in the morning before going to school..I teach in the afternoon session..Then at night I went to teach part-time at a tuition centre..At 12

midnight when everyone was asleep, I started my reading and did my assignments..

(P2)

P3 made the following comment;

Yes I know I don't have as many responsibilities compared to my friends who are married. This doesn't mean I am a free man. My siblings relied on me..I am the eldest. My father is a pensioner. I didn't want to trouble him. I wanted to pay for my own studies. On top of that, I helped pay for my younger siblings' education too. Isn't it obvious that I need to finish my studies as soon as possible so that I could contribute more to the family?

(P3)

Most interesting is how the participants manipulated their family commitments for the benefit of their studies. Two of the participants (P1 and P2) are married while the other (P3) is single. All of them claim to have obligations either as a parent and a spouse or as a child who is committed to making his parents proud of his academic achievement. According to P1 who is married,

...At 12 midnight when everyone was asleep, I started my reading and did my assignments..I know..I could not be doing this forever..I must finish quickly.. One more thing, there was a time my parents organized my daughter's birthday party because I was too busy with my studies then..I didn't even attend the party. You see how much I have missed?

(P1)

P2 commented;

My husband showed me a long face when I told him I have to leave. At first he was OK, later when I was already in my third semester, I guess he couldn't take it anymore. I was always not available. I know he tried to be supportive.. but he also preferred me to be home at time..Not just him. I also want to be there for them.

(P2)

P3 who is not married stated (P3);

I wanted to complete my Masters...My parents had been insisting I graduate. They wanted to see me graduate. They said I am the first in the family to have achieved this height in academic.

(P3)

Hence, to complete their studies was of prime importance. While the married participants were worried about quality time with their family, the single participant was worried about his parental expectations. As claimed by Abdullah (1996), the lives of the Malays are centred around family, village, country and social group ties. This finding in particular highlights only the participants' relationship orientedness as emphasized through family ties.

When summarizing the responses given by all the three participants, it could be concluded that the cultural values; religious and relationship oriented, have influenced the participants' views on learning. Two participants (P1 and P2) had used religion as a pillar of their emotional and spiritual strengths while all of them agreed that relationship orientedness was one reason why they needed to complete their studies on time in order to have quality time or fulfil parental expectation. Additionally, relationship orientedness was important since one participant claimed that she valued guidance from her family while another participant claimed that he wanted to make his family proud. The fact that the respondents valued their family members' interests as well as their own is an indication that the respondents might be described as 'collectivistic'. What they did was not only for themselves but also for the family's interests. As Hofstede (1991) claims, group interest is as important as or more important than the individual interests in relation to having 'collectivistic' values.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study were discussed based on what is known about Malay cultural values. They relied on the responses given by the three participants identified through a purposive sampling. Hence, the researcher acknowledges that the findings may not be generalizable to other settings. Nonetheless, the discussion may manage to shed some light on how the identified cultural values might have influenced the participants' views on learning in completing their Master's degree successfully. What the study does not show is the degree of importance that these values have for the participants' learning.

The findings were discussed to suggest answers to the research questions which are; 1) What are the cultural values according to Abdullah (1996) that influence the research participants' views on learning?, and 2) How have their cultural values influenced their views on learning?

In answering the first question, the dominant cultural values identified from the present study are 'religious', 'relationship orientedness', and 'collectivistic'. The three cultural values are found to shape the participants' views on learning. The views are portrayed in their responses as they described their learning experience in the programme. As Merriam and Mohamad (2000) and Abdullah (1996) claimed, 'religious', 'relationship oriented', and 'collectivistic' are some of the cultural values of the Malays.

In addition, to provide an answer to the second question the study has discovered how the values had influenced the participants' views on learning. Working under a lot of pressure and constraints, the participants had proven that their religion and relationship orientedness had indeed helped them to view learning as something possible to be accomplished and that they could complete their studies successfully, and on time. Participants viewed learning as a task which needed to be completed because it was seen as necessary since the participants wanted quality time with their families and to fulfil parental expectations.

Based on the gathered responses, it could also be deduced that all the participants who shared similar views on learning based on two cultural values; 'religion' and 'relationship orientedness' in their attempt to complete the programme pursued. The other two cultural values namely, 'hierarchical' and 'face' did not emerge from the research possibly due to the focus of the present study which sought to investigate the participants' views on learning as well as the design of the study which employed interviews or the nature of the small sample. Alternatively, it could mean that these values are no longer of significance for these students. Nonetheless, the respondents could be said to be 'collectivistic' since all of them claim that 'religion' and 'relationship orientedness' – two Malay values – had an influence on how they viewed learning. The respondents' individual interests are subordinate to or in conflict with their group interests and they appear to depend on others for the courage and strength needed to continue with their studies.

The findings from the present study may add to the growing body of research on the cultural values of Asian adult learners. It provides limited evidence that Malay culture has in some respects influenced three relatively high achieving Malay students' views on learning.

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